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OTMOOR.

Otmoor is a plain four square miles in extent, lying about 194 feet above the sea with very slight differences of level. The parish of Charlton, including the hamlets of Fencott and Murcott, surrounds its northern border. On the south-east and south rise the hills of Studley and Beckley, and to the west lie the villages of Oddington and Noke. It is drained by the River Ray, which falls into the Cherwell at Islip. The origin of the name is uncertain. It may be from the same root which we find in "otter," the water animal, and in the name Otford. The village of Oddington is described as Ottendun in old documents, and the convent there was at Ottelei. There are Otleys in Suffolk and Yorkshire, and an Oteley near Ellesmere, in Shropshire. At the time of the Roman Invasion the Dobuni occupied the district between the Chilterns and the Cotswolds. Of the subsequent period the old Roman Road is an indubitable relic. A mile and a half of its course of 16 miles, from Dorchester on the Thames to Alchester, near Bicester, crosses Otmoor. The latter part of this stretch retains its ancient dimensions, and stones may still be seen on its surface. At the Beckley end the stones were regularly quarried within the memory of a man still living,* and no doubt for centuries its stones were used to coat the roads of the neighbourhood. It is still possible to drive a cart along it in summer. A good deal of it may have subsided,

* When they wanted stone they used to get it from the field next "Hundred Acres" on the Beckley side out of the Roman Road. The stones were about a foot underground. It was as good as a carriage road, 8 feet broad or so, the stones rather bigger than ducks' eggs, and the coating 9—12 inches thick.—H. K.

and much might still be found under the grass.[†] The road leaves the parish of Charlton at "Struttle," or Street Hill, where it enters the parish of Merton. Roman Pottery has been found near to its course in Fencott, and in 1815, when the present Rectory of Oddington was being built, several skeletons were uncovered in the garden. They had the appearance of having been laid hurriedly in the ground. Some had helmets on, and one had the head of a spear fixed between the lower rib and the hip. The men were tall and large. The adjoining field on the Charlton side called "Brismere" is said to have yielded some Roman Pottery. It was the eastern part of the territory of the Dobuni into which the West Saxons penetrated after the conquest of Surrey. This was dominated by Four Towns, afterwards represented by Bensington and Ensham on the Thames, Aylesbury, and Lenborough (near Buckingham). The power of the Four Towns was soon broken by the invaders, of whom one part may have advanced from the Ikniel Way along the Thames and then along the Roman Road to where the fortress of Alchester barred their passage. The skeletons at "Brismere" and the name of Ambrosden may be connected with some last resistances offered in this neighbourhood to the advancing host, though both lie off the actual course of the road. The place-names on the hillsides and ridges around Otmoor tell of the little settlements made by our forefathers, when they had thoroughly conquered the land. From Dorchester in due time no doubt S. Birinus sent his missionaries along the Roman Way. Crosses and baptismal fonts marked the places where now rise the Churches of Charlton, Oddington, Noke

[†] In 1841 "An Account of the Roman Road from Alchester to Dorchester," being the subject of a paper read to the Ashmolean Society by the Rev. Robert Hussey, B.D., was published by John Henry Parker.

and Woodeaton. The floral honours of May Day were transferred from the heathen goddess to the Blessed Virgin, and the "garland" still seen on Charlton Rood Screen is a relic of an earlier worship. With the Conquest, came the great families of D'Oily and D'Ivry swallowing up the Otmoor manors. When the D'Ivry family became extinct, the Honour, including Ambrosden, Beckley and other places, which had belonged to them, passed into the hands of the St. Walerys. Of this barony Beckley became the caput, and Otmoor came to be regarded as "waste" of the manor of Beckley. It was the fowling and fishery of the lords of Beckley, while the seven Otmoor towns, Beckley, Horton, Charlton, Fencott, Murcott, Oddington and Noke had rights of common upon it, and their rights of common became unstinted in regard to oxen, but limited with regard to sheep. A Moor Court was established at Beckley, and animals not branded found on the moor were impounded there. The customs of Beckley were recorded, and to Beckley the homagers of the seven towns repaired. Each town had a distinct brand.

In 1787, Alexander Croke, Esq., of Studley Priory, addressed a pamphlet to the Earl of Abingdon, Lord of the Manor, on enclosing Otmoor. He asserted that "the ground was always overstocked, and as there was no stint every man put in all the cattle he could muster, without any regard to the size of his farm. Those who had none of their own brought in large flocks and herds of agistments. Farmers who had concerns in distant places frequently rented some small matter, perhaps only a small cottage in one of the Otmoor towns, to give them a right of common, and under this pretence brought on their whole stock of 300 or 400 sheep, and forty or fifty head of cattle." Some attempt to survey the common was made and resisted, and a petition

was sent to Lord Abingdon claiming to represent the wishes of 340 families against the enclosure. Most of the cottagers, it asserted, were very poor and looked to the geese they reared on the common to provide them with winter fuel. Lord Abingdon answered Mr. Croke stating his positive objection to any such scheme, and his determination not to allow his rights as Lord of the Manor to be infringed. A petition was presented to Parliament by Alexander Croke, John Sawyer, and James Moore, Esquires, and a counter petition by Lord Abingdon asserting his rights, followed by a petition signed by 169 freeholders, landholders, cottagers, and others to the same effect. In 1788 Lord Abingdon circulated a pamphlet among the members of the House of Commons on the "Case of Otmoor," setting forth the above-mentioned circumstances, and also pointing to the weakness of Croke's position, as he could not claim in respect of Studley, where his property lay, to have any real interest in Otmoor, Studley not being one of the seven towns. "His assessments might as well be in the new constellation of the Georgium Sidus as where they are." No deed could be produced carrying *any* right with regard to Otmoor, and on immemorial custom alone all rights depended. After the death of Lord Abingdon in 1799, other considerations began to tell in favour of the enclosure. In 1813 Arthur Young in his "General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire" describes his visit to this waste. He found no peat, but considered the soil a good loam, the rights of commonage not very valuable, and the pasturage bad for sheep. He stayed with Mr. Weyland, at Wood-eaton, and the farmer who took him over the moor told him he had lost seventeen score of sheep by the rot, only three of his flock being saved. Young saw but few horses, beasts, and geese there. It seemed a scandal

that so near Oxford so large a tract of country should remain waste in summer and under water in winter "in a kingdom that regularly imports to the amount of a million sterling in corn, and is almost periodically visited with apprehensions of want." He learned that no sheep had been turned on the common in 1807 through fear of the rot. The land ought to let if drained, Young thought, at 30s., and some asserted even 40s. an acre. Young quotes a Mr. Davis as describing the extent of Otmoor as 4,000 acres, which it never can have been, and as confirming the account of the "moor evil," which affected the sheep. The same person informed him that there was no stint of common, and that there were large flocks of geese there. Otmoor was then at the beginning of the 19th century a grassy plain with no regular road except the Roman Way, no trees, no hedges, no landmark above ground save one, "Joseph's Stone." This lies now in two pieces in the lane leading from the Roman Road to Oddington. It was probably placed there as a mounting-block for those who were riding on Otmoor. It is not in the least like a Roman milestone, as has been asserted. It is not "Jacob's Stone," as Mr. Dunkin calls it, but "Joseph's Stone." There was no road at all from Fencott to Murcott, and the meandering Ray was insufficient to drain the moor. Consequently there were "flits," or marshy hollows, and "pills," or accumulations of quaking bog. There is at the Beckley end of the Roman Road, before it leaves the "100 acres," a boggy piece of land still known as "Fowls' Pill." Any little pond is called a "lake," and Fencott, Murcott, Marlake, as well as a piece of land at Fencott known as "Splosh," tell of the former condition of the district. Dunkin speaks of "a dreary waste" and "coarse aquatic sward." It is not wonderful that the region was not only unproductive, but

unhealthy. Ague was prevalent. An old man now living (T.W.) had "the ager" once for twenty weeks, and his son had it too. Another (J.M.) had it twice. The fit returned every three days, but his master made him go on working, and ultimately had it himself. There was no bridge at Fencott, and the ford must have been dangerous indeed in flood-time. The present road from Fencott to Charlton was then only the "Church Way," leading through the open field.

These considerations may have induced many to favour the scheme for draining* and enclosing Otmoor, in spite of local opposition, and in 1815 a bill was passed with that object, and a Commissioner and Surveyors were sworn to impartiality. The work was proceeded with at once, and the owners affected by the new drainage works were compensated. The principal cut was a canal, which starting from the Ray at Ditch Moor, a quarter of a mile below Fencott Bridge, flows past Charlton and Oddington, and is re-united with the Ray above Islip. There is now a weir where the old course is left, but at first only a bank was reared, which gave way. The Reverend Philip Serle, the Rector of Oddington, one of the chief promoters of the enclosure, was held to be largely responsible for this. Hence the lines :—

It was narrowback, the parson,
As I have heard 'em say,
Who employed the Parish Clerk
To stop the River Ray.
He blockèd up the water
For four foot high or more,
To injure other farmers
And keep it out of Otmoor.

Sir Alexander Croke, John Sawyer, Esq., the Rev.

* One plan suggested for draining Otmoor was to carry the water out by Noke and Woodeaton. It was also suggested that a cut might be made between Horton and Beckley to the Thame Valley.

P. Serle, and the Rev. T. L. Cooke, of Beckley, were popularly considered to be responsible for the enclosure. In accordance with the Act, the Commissioner assigned to the Lord Abingdon, who had succeeded the early champion of Otmoor, one sixteenth of the soil in compensation of his rights as Lord of the Manor, to Sir Alexander Croke one eighth as a composition for all tithe upon the common, the residue to go among the several parishes, townships, and hamlets according to respective rights, regard being had to quantity and quality of the soil as well as situation. This allotment was to be held in common for the owners and proprietors of messuages, &c., in the townships. If at a future time the major part in value of the owners should desire a division among those interested, the Commissioner should divide the lot according to their interest therein. The award was proclaimed in Beckley Church by the Clerk on Sunday, April 19, 1829, and at Beckley the original remains. Passing over the Roads and Drains, we note that to Montague Earl of Abingdon were allotted in compensation for rights of soil two pieces of land containing 102A. and 5A. To Sir A. Croke, LL.D., in satisfaction for all tithes, 151A. and 63A. (He held the impropriated tithe of Studley Priory, but it is hard to understand how Otmoor could have been regarded as titheable.)

Beckley received	.....	303A. odd.	
Horton	„	.....	262 „
Studley	„	.....	200 „
Oddington	„	.....	311 „
Charlton	„	.....	213 „
Fencott and Murcott	.....	204	„
		61	„
Noke	„	.....	77 „

Upon the requisition of the major part in value of the

persons interested in the several plots, the Commissioner proceeded to adjudge their allotments to the several parties. He then sold various pieces to pay the expenses chargeable in respect of the plots assigned to the parishes. The parties who received allotments were ordered to pay their share of expenses incurred and to put up their fences within two months.* Ditches and tunnels at the bridges had also to be made. These expenses no doubt had increased the smouldering discontent of the poor. To add to this the summer of 1829 was wet, and lands above and below Otmoor were flooded. Embankments were cut, and some prosecutions took place. Mr. Justice Allan Park gave it as his opinion that the Commissioners had not properly executed the Act of Parliament, and the defendants were acquitted.† The inhabitants of the Otmoor towns took this as an intimation that they were not bound by the Act. Farmers Bonner and W. Kirby of Charlton, and Ward of Noke, are mentioned among others as stimulating the indignation of the Otmoor people. In August, 1830, men at night gathered at their houses, and after being supplied with beer and victuals disguised themselves by blacking their faces and tying black scarves over their heads. Their numbers varied on different nights from 20 to 150, and about ten o'clock they would set out with axes and billhooks to cut down stakes and hedges. A stank on the Ray had been cut rather

* Dunkin says that "in the spring of 1819 many at Charlton and elsewhere purchased these allotments for £5, and prevailed on the Commissioners to throw them into one lot, thus forming a valuable estate." These were the small portions "assigned to each cottager in lieu of his commonage." If this be true, the poor were not robbed, as has always been believed in Charlton and elsewhere, but were at any rate treated with great want of consideration. Is it not very probable that owners of property however small were compensated, but that the cottager *who was only a tenant* got nothing?

† Justice Park's remarks seem to have referred to the making of the new course of the River Ray, not to any question of allotments.

earlier in the summer. At first there was no action taken on the part of the authorities, and the rioters declared their intention of carrying on their work on September 6th by daylight. It was a bright morning, and some hundreds assembled. A party, of whom one at least (W.B.) still lives, were cutting a regular way through the hedges on the Murcott side of the moor, but from Oddington, "as fast as the sloppy nature of the ground would let them get on" were coming a better armed force, the yeomanry with the High Sheriff and a magistrate : while another party under Mr. Coker had gone round to Murcott. When the first party came upon the rioters they tried to induce them to desist, but without effect. Then the Riot Act was read, and the arrest of the trespassers was ordered. Some ran through the brook close by, and others escaped in different directions. Thirty or forty however were taken, and got together on the Red Bridge, or "Waterloo Bridge" as it is called, near Murcott, the bridge having at that time walls. The prisoners were then marched off to Islip. There was a furious downpour of rain as they crossed the "Great Burge" at Oddington. One lad (J.H.) still living, who was soaked, was allowed to return from Islip. For the rest waggons were procured, and the yeomanry took their prisoners on to Oxford in them. It was the day of St. Giles' Fair, and the Otmoor men were easily recognised. Cries were raised of "Otmoor for ever," brickbats were lying handy, the yeomanry were perhaps not sorry to be rid of their prisoners, and the waggons were soon emptied. The same day the men returned home, but a search was made for them afterwards. Several of them had "to go to hide and seek," and stories are told of their being hidden in lofts, in carts, and in the corn-fields, but there were informers or "white-eyed ones" who gave information, and about

37 were arrested. Short terms of imprisonment were in most cases inflicted. An elderly man now living remembers, as a child, hearing his father return at night to their cottage at Murcott, and go in next door to see a neighbour. It must have been a sad business where, as in this case, there were a family of little children, and a subscription to meet legal expenses was got up by some Otmoor farmers. A wine merchant of Oxford, hearing two of these cases in court, got up a similar subscription, and issued an advertisement for help to those who had suffered "by the iniquitous enclosure and by imprisonment." He also republished Lord Abingdon's pamphlet of 1787 with some reflections. Sir A. Croke was highly incensed, He had already met with opposition in political matters from this Mr. Smith, and a libel action against Smith was the result. It came on before Mr. Justice Taunton at the Oxford Spring Assizes, 1832. Smith's pamphlet was calculated, it was urged, to influence public opinion while the Otmoor Trials were still in progress. It had been thought necessary to have a detachment of the guards stationed at Islip, and the district was said to be in a dangerous condition. On the other side it was submitted that the military display was really uncalled for and was intended to influence this very trial. Justice Taunton summed up rather against the defendant, and the jury after deliberating all night declared that they were unable to agree, and were dismissed. So ended the libel trial. The trials of the rioters continued, and when I asked an old Otmoor prisoner once what the prisoners got by their proceedings, he replied simply, "some two months and some more."

With regard to the present condition of Otmoor, now that it is well drained, some land at Fencott and Murcott quite realises Young's expectations. It is as

good arable land as you could wish to see. Of the rest the pasturage is improved. Horses, cattle, and sheep are to be seen in the enclosures in large numbers. The hay is rather coarse. Towards Beckley the land lets for very little. The floods are still severe while they last, but now they only last a few days, where formerly they lasted weeks and even months. A man still living can recall one which lasted sixteen weeks in summer, and in 1894 Otmoor was completely under water. The road between Fencott and Murcott is overflowed most winters. The floods come suddenly and make it difficult at times to remove the stock. The moor is a favourite resort of plovers, and the wild ducks from Boarstall Decoy often come hither at night, and do not all return. In summer our green lanes are a favourite resort of the gipsies, and though no poet or painter has taken Otmoor for his subject, its peaceful beauty is not unfelt by the dwellers in the Otmoor Towns.



NOTES ON THE BOTANY OF OTMOOR.

G. CLARIDGE DRUCE, M.A., F.L.S. ETC.

The drainage and enclosure of Otmoor has made a great change in the physical character of the district and the vegetation has materially altered during the last seventy years, but so far as I am able to learn no species has actually been exterminated although doubtless the individuals of the marsh type are very greatly lessened, and we lack recent records of the occurrence of the Marsh Violet (*Viola stagnina*), which was gathered on Otmoor in 1820, and which may even yet linger in some nook, and the small Fleabane (*Pulicaria vulgaris*), which was last seen about 1834, is not unlikely to be re-found, while *Rumex palustris*, which I gathered in the eighties, will also probably be again found. Doubtless at one time the reed-beds were much more extensive than they are at present, and I believe at one time they afforded shelter for the great Marsh Sow-thistle (*Sonchus palustris*), for this very rare plant still grows in a locality not far distant in a place to which it is not unlikely the seeds of the Otmoor plants were conveyed to by the wind.

Among the striking features of the Otmoor streams and ditches at the present day are the Flowering Rush or Water Gladiole (*Butomus umbellatus*), which is a generally distributed plant in suitable lowland localities throughout the district drained by the Upper Thames and its tributaries, and the same may be said of the Great Water Dock (*Rumex Hydrolapatheum*), which is a great ornament to the river side, and the Water Dropwort (*Oenanthe fluviatilis*) is very common. The Forget-me-not (*Myosotis palustris*) is very

frequent, as is the Water Speedwell (*Veronica Anagallis-aquatica*). Both the Water Lilies occur and the Water Starwort is represented by two species (*Callitriche stagnalis* and *C. obtusangula*), the beautiful Water Violet (*Hottonia palustris*) occurs, and in stagnant water may occasionally be found the Bladderwort (*Utricularia vulgaris*), the Frog-bit (*Hydrocharis Morsus-ranae*), the Bladder Sedge (*Carex vesicaria*) and *Oenanthe Phellandrium*. On the marshy fields may be found the Marsh Veronica (*Veronica scutellata*) as a glabrous pale flowered plant and more locally *Polygonum minus* and *Samolus Valerandi*, the latter on the borders of ponds or dykes where there is often a profuse growth of *Polygonum maculatum* and the Water Chickweed (*Cerastium aquaticum*); here, too, may occasionally be seen *Rumex maritimus*. In very marshy places the Glaucous Stitchwort (*Stellaria palustris*) grows, and in stiffer soil *Juncus compressus*. On the margins of ponds and on places which are occasionally inundated we may see *Chenopodium rubrum* in that small state which has been named as a variety *pseudo-botryoides*. But we shall search in vain for the usual plants of peaty bogs, as here the basic rather than the acidulous character of the marsh, does not favour the occurrence of the Sundews, the Heath (*Erica Tetralix*) or the sedges (*Carex pulicaris*, *C. dioica*, and *C. rostrata*) which are such frequent constituents of peat vegetation. In fact we shall find that the prevailing pond weed here is *Potamogeton natans*, whereas in heathy districts *P. polygonifolius* is the one that occurs. Here, too, the Bur Marigold is *Bidens tripartita*, whereas *B. cernua* is more frequent on the Bagshot Sands, and instead of the Carices mentioned above, the common one on Otmoor is the Fox Sedge (*Carex vulpina*), and the grass *Molinia* which covers such

large areas of the peat mosses is here replaced by *Glyceria fluitans*, *G. plicata*, *G. aquatica*, *Alopecurus geniculatus* and forms of *Agrostis alba*.

The rarity of the Great Spearwort and the absence of *Oenanthe crocata*, *Echinodorus ranunculoides*, and the Bog Violet (*Viola palustris*) have also their significance. On the whole the flora cannot be considered a rich one, as even the great reed (*Phragmites*) is less frequent than in the reed beds of the Thames and the Kennet, and the district is now doubtless in that transitional condition when the aboriginal vegetation is being gradually replaced by those plants which follow in the wake of cultivation, and which are less interesting because they are ubiquitous over the cultivated areas of England. I should, however, suggest to any resident in the Otmoor district, who may be interested in Botany, that an enumeration of the whole of the plants of his neighbourhood, would be of considerable value, and it is not unlikely that a careful examination of the less explored areas might be rewarded by the discovery of some unrecorded forms. To assist in identifying the species I should always feel delighted to offer my services.









































